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A House with No Walls

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A House with No Walls

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Abstract:

As a child, I often listened to my father's stories of his boyhood in 1950s Czechoslovakia; adventures taking place in the narrow cobblestoned streets of his hometown or near the fields and lakes of his grandparents' village. I never met any of his family. And by the time I was born, the streets and buildings that came alive in his descriptions were gone: they were demolished together with eighty other towns in the area to make way for expanding coal mines. With no way to connect my father's memories to physical locations or even images, the stories I heard sounded like make-believe, no more real than the tales I read in my storybooks.

A House with No Walls is an artist book born from my need to fill these voids in family history and geography. Referencing a rich tradition of bookmaking in art, craft, and alternative publishing, the book combines photographs, historical maps of the town of Most where both my father and I were born, drawings of my walks in the area, and text addressed to my father. While the photographs suggest an interplay of presence and absence and the ability of landscape to simultaneously obliterate history and reveal it, the historical maps printed on transparencies point to the transitory nature of cartographic practices in a location subject to frequently shifting borders. Finally, the text highlights the significance of oral narratives for our understanding of history. Together, these elements speak to the difficulty of photographically representing the past and suggest an alternative mapping of history and geography. Offering an interactive experience through accordion binding, foldouts, and map overlays, *A House with No Walls* invites readers to walk through a real and imaginary landscape and consider the fractured identities in regions and lives affected by resource extraction and the impermanence of our concept of home.

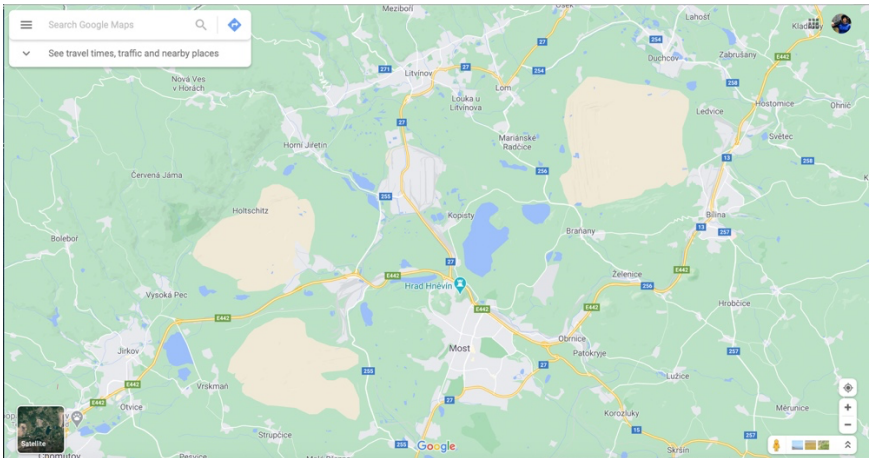
List of Figures:

A House with No Walls

I was born in the town of Most, an industrial city situated along the northern border of the Czech Republic with Germany. This area has a long history of lignite coal mining that reaches back to the middle ages. Coal mining expanded in the 1950s and consequently had a lasting impact on the landscape, environment, and socioeconomics of the area.[1] To accommodate the growing size of the mines, between 1959 and the early 1990s, about eighty towns and villages were fully or partially demolished. Among them was the old town of Most, a historic city with fifty thousand residents—where my father was born, and the town of Dolní Jiřetín where he spent his early childhood.

While I grew up very close to my maternal grandparents, I never knew any of my father's relatives.[2] I also could not visit many of the locations connected to his childhood and young adulthood. Furthermore, my parents moved from the area soon after I was born, and while my

[1] Fig. 1. Current Google Earth map with three of the presently active mines (in light beige color) illustrates the extent of coal mining in the North-Bohemian basin. For comparison, in the grey color is the modern city of Most of about 60 thousand inhabitants.



[2] My father was an only child raised by a single mother who passed away shortly after I was born. His father did not live in the area and while my father kept a relationship with him, my paternal grandfather and I did not meet.

new hometown was geographically close, it provided enough distance that I grew up removed from my birth town and my father's roots. The family photographs I saw as a child offered only a little remedy: the images featured either formal black and white studio portraits of people I did not relate to, or rare snapshots of distant figures with barely recognizable features standing in front of houses that no longer existed, in towns that too had disappeared. As a result, I would frequently confuse a portrait of one relative for another and felt no more connection to these black and white photographs than to any historical images. In fact, when my father recently shared a class photograph taken outside of a school in now non-existent town, he himself could not remember the year it had been taken or even recognize himself in the image. Consequently, throughout my childhood, I gained a more immediate understanding of my father's stories about his youth and his parents' and grandparents' lives through oral history which often conflicted with the physical evidence of past events.

Fig. 2. *Old Most*, archival photograph, circa 1970.

Fig. 3. *Old Most*, 2020.

A House with No Walls is an artist book born from my need to connect with my family history and geography. The book comprises twenty-four photographs, most of which are taken in the north Bohemian town of Most or its vicinity, text addressed to my father, historical maps of the town of Most before its demolition in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and hand-drawn outlines of my walks in the area.

"I am not a poet, I am a city, ill equipped to write about the affairs of people. I am a city, a new city. I cannot bear witness to the past, I can describe only what I see," writes the Czech poet Pavel Brycz about the town of Most.[3] *A House with No Walls* describes what I see and bears witness to the past through a combination of historical maps, text that highlights the importance

[3] Pavel Brycz, *I, City* (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1998).

of oral history, and photographs taken within the last year. However, as many of the towns I photographed were destroyed in the late 1970s and 1980s, no visible remnants of the past are left. In choosing to photograph sites that are now void of any visible signs of history, I am highlighting the absence of that past and the absence of my connection with the past. In this way, I am attempting to imitate the experience I had in my childhood when certain periods of my family history were limited to stories and not events sensed visually, either directly or through photographs. In my book, I am expressing this concept by the juxtaposition of text that serves as a contextualizing vehicle and images that highlight the absence of tangible evidence.

Fig. 4. *A House with No Walls*, Handbound Artist Book, 2021.

Photography has a long history of engagement with memory and with the past. Since the conception of the media in 1839, artists have directed their cameras towards events that preceded the act of photographing. In 1866, for example, Alexander Gardner, a renowned portrait and field photographer, published *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*—a two-volume collection of photographs depicting the Civil War—in order to give its true account. The publication included one hundred photographs portraying the direct aftermath of the war and its casualties, as well as images showing the outside of courthouses, military camps, or hotels where negotiations had occurred—images that on their own did not reveal the wartime time events or their aftermath.[4] In fact, in the accompanying text, Gardner frequently describes how these sites had changed beyond recognition either because of their reclamation by nature or because they had been plundered by relic hunters.[5]

Although the understanding of photography's ability to convey the truth has since evolved, photographs still possess the ability to communicate and engage their viewers with stories of the past. Even photographs that were, similarly to Gardner's Civil War images taken months, years, or even decades after the event, have their significance as records of history. As the art historian Kate Palmer Albers notes, Charles Sanders Pierce's definition of index that was adopted in photographic studies to describe photography's unique relationship with its subject, includes "anything that focuses the attention" such as "a rap on the door," or "the North Star which directs attention to the North." In that sense, photographs of events taken long after the

[4] Alexander Gardner, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959).
[5] Athens, "Relic, Photograph, Text: Picturing History in Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War."

events occurred function as a declaration of histories whose visible evidence is no longer present, which they bring to the viewer's attention.[6]

In *Infertile Grounds*, the Croatian artist Sandra Vitaljić photographs places that had significance in Croatian history and for the creation of Croatian identity—landscapes that are "marked by trauma, historical events, and human experience but that also became a part of the official rhetoric in legitimizing ideologies and political systems."[7] Her photographs feature places that have not been marked by a single memorial sign and landscapes with a memorial or some object of remembrance in their current state. As a result, her photographs function as sites of memory and as a commentary on the politics of remembering.

Similarly, when I was photographing in the vicinity of the town of Most, I paid attention to the transitions of landscape from coal mines to their post-mining state as well as to how these locations are marked. Most often, I found no signs indicating any history before the current state. Other sites were marked by signs that helped me locate the particular place. However, these signs would only mention the history of the mining activity itself, such as the name and year of the particular shaft or the mining accidents that had occurred there. Any consequences of that activity for the landscape and local inhabitants were not mentioned—a remnant, I believe, from the years of communism, when mining activity was celebrated and miners as the workers were considered national heroes. Furthermore, I believe that within the context of the Czech Republic, the locations of former towns demolished in the 1970s and 1980s constitute what heritage studies define as sites of shame—a range of places, sites, and institutions that

[6] Kate Palmer Albers, *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).116.
[7] Vitaljić, *Infertile Grounds*. (Pula: Eikon Studio, 2012).

represent the legacy of painful periods of history.[8] As I was conducting research about people displaced from their homes due to coal mining, I was struck by the lack of data that commemorated the demolished towns. The text I encountered—most often in fiction or poetry—often reflected embarrassment about the attitude of indifference common in the 1970s and 1980s towards the demolitions. And even though I have no direct memory about these events, when I asked myself what propelled me to photograph these locations now and not five or ten years ago, I detected a feeling of embarrassment over the plundered landscape that previously stopped me from recording it in photographs.

The coal mines that replaced centuries-old towns and with them a wealth of local knowledge thus started to function for me metaphorically as symbols of forgetting, loss, reluctance to reveal the truth, and rupture in communities and personal lives. *A House with No Walls* reflects this theme in both the text and images. While the text frequently alludes to forgotten stories of the past, partial information, or irretrievable memories, the selected photographs often portray different barriers to seeing or entering the full scope of the image: darkness of the night, fog, closed entry to a cave, etc. This impenetrability is further highlighted by the juxtaposition with images that point to presumably lost or remembered human presence, an interior of a house, tracks in the field going nowhere, or a chicken behind a fence.

> "Like me, you grew up in your mother's world, your father's roots only a far-away presence. You know only a little about those distant aunts and uncles, snippets of their lives that stuck in your memory. Now you tell me about the uncle who was a carpenter with hands so big that one night when he got drunk and slapped someone in the bar, the other man lost his hearing.

[8] William Logan and Keir Reeves, eds., *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2009).

> “And your aunt?” I ask? “She died at the end of the war, weakened from torture by Nazis, but that is all I know,” you say, and I think of the portrait that has always hung in your study, a painting of a woman with a soft look in her hazel eyes, and a last name that is the same as mine and wonder how an entire life can fit into one sentence.”
>
> Excerpt from *A House with No Walls*

Fig. 5. Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, 2021.

Despite the medium’s direct relationship with its subject, photography frequently serves as a powerful tool in evoking personal histories and for sharing one’s memories with others. In *Night Calls*, for instance, Rebecca Norris Webb retraces the routes of her father’s house calls to patients—often in the middle of the night when many people are delivered to this world or when

they leave it.[9] Guided by her father's old handwritten logs, his memories, and her own, she uses photography to relive the experiences of her childhood and to reconnect with her father's former life. Accompanying the photographs of her father's former patients and her childhood landscape is a handwritten text that provides historical context to her images and serves as a vehicle to share her memories of growing up in rural Indiana. Written as a series of letters addressed to her father, Webb's text was a direct inspiration for how I constructed the text in *A House with No Walls*.

Depicting her native Rush County in Indiana, the landscape Norris Webb photographs offers a setting for her narrative and serves as a metaphor for its residents, their lives, and the passage of time. Often driving at night, she photographs landscapes from her car window to evoke her father's late-night drives to patients. At the same time, her own drives several decades later provide her with space to reminiscence about her father and their relationship and the local community and history.

Similarly to Norris Webb, last summer I retraced the locations connected to my father's childhood and youth guided by historical maps, my father's memories, his expertise in local history, and above all, by the landscape itself. Frequently, my father joined me on my expeditions, and as we walked or traveled on local trains and buses, he would share stories of local and personal history and geography—guiding me at once through the present and the past. Similarly to Rebecca Norris Webb's letters to her father in *Night Calls*, I addressed the text in *A House with No Walls* to my father—a continuation of our conversations that were inspired by the landscape I explored.

[9] Rebecca Norris Webb, *Night Calls* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2020).

> You talk about your family, the generations whose lives were entwined with this border region where history often arrived first. Later, I visit the locations of their long-buried homes as if by placing myself at the same coordinates, I can gain an understanding of the generations that once lived here and, through them, understand myself.
>
> One afternoon, I walk to Dolní Jiřetín, the town where you spent your early childhood raised by your maternal grandparents. I follow old maps and your memories but find no easy path to a town that is no longer there. Wading through a stream and a field of stinging nettles, I finally arrive at a lake that replaced the centuries-old town. I hear it is a good place for fishing.
>
> Excerpt from *A House with No Walls*

Despite my research of historical maps, I frequently faced difficulties locating and accessing the sites of towns demolished decades ago. For instance, when I was walking to Dolní Jiřetín, I was uncertain on what side of the road the lake that had replaced the town was located and found it only after wading through a stream and overgrown bushes and stinging nettles. On another occasion, I was stopped by security and walked from the mining property back to the gate. Furthermore, due to the lack of signs, and the large size of the mines, I was not always certain whether I found the exact location. My act of visiting and photographing places with no visual signs of previous history became, therefore, more about the seeking than the finding. It was through the process of searching and walking that I could learn about and acknowledge the past.

In February 2005, the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign organized a symposium called “Walking as Knowing as Making” that classified walking as “a conversation between the body and the world” and as a distinct mode of acting, interpreting

and knowing that results in a distinct way of making.[10] Likewise, when I was photographing in and near Most, I was able to learn and interpret the history of my birth town through the act of walking even though no visual signs of history were evident in many of the locations I explored. Although I was aware that the sites I photographed featured an ordinary landscape with vegetation common in other parts of the world, such as fireweed, birch trees, and grasses, and that the resulting photographs would not be indicative of the space and time that they were taken in, my walks became an integral part of my project. Through the act of walking in the places transformed by coal mining, I was able to experience the scale and the spatial relationship of former towns and the mines that replaced them and fully understand the extent of destruction in my birth town and the ramifications of this for future generations, myself included, to their ability to identify with the landscape of their birth. Through the act of walking, to use the words of the Walking Artist Richard Fulton, I have gained "a heightened sense of human history."[11]

In 1969, Richard Fulton—one of the first Walking Artists—embarked on a pivotal project that set him on the path of an artist who swore to "only create art resulting from walks."[12] He called this project, *The Way to the Mountain Starts Here*, where "Here" was the pavement in front of Saint's Martin school where he was a student at that time. In a later interview, Fulton described the light-bulb moment when he felt like he was seeing the pavement for the first time. Through this awareness of the present moment, Fulton developed a consciousness of time as a broader entity; from a desire to make walks, an understanding of

[10] University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "Walking as Knowing as Making," 2005, http://walkinginplace.org/converge/.
[11] Hamish Fulton, "An Object Cannot Compete with Experience" (London: AA School of Architecture, 2010).
[12] Ibid.

time "that has to do with your lifetime, which has to do with death," emerged.[13] Similarly, while I walked in locations affected by mining and captured their current state in my photographs, my project also refers to time that has already passed and is no longer evident. This slipperiness of time and place is reflected by the hand-drawn routes of my walks that in *A House with No Walls* are removed from their original location on the map. Instead, they point to an abstracted landscape that imitates the disconnected way the demolished towns that my father experienced in his childhood functioned in my mind. Furthermore, I embraced the fluidity of time and space while I photographed. While most photographs featured in *A House with No Walls* were taken in the town of Most and its vicinity, about a third of them were made in New York State.

Fig. 6. *A House with No Walls*, Handbound Artist book, 2021

[13] Hamish Fulton, "Conversation with Peter Lodermeyer," in *Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence* (DuMont, 2010), 180–89.

In *Walking and Mapping*, Karen O'Rourke investigates the intersections of mapping and walking and outlines the history of different walking movements from the 1960s when the Situationists coined the term psychogeography to the current art practices of deep mapping and emotional GPS.[14] She suggests that the ease of mapping devices has led to the resurgence of walking as a subject in art and the birth of "datascapes"—landscapes created by GPS devices. This idea directly relates to my walk drawings in my work. They are datascapes that refer to my walking routes and suggest imaginary landscapes through the outlines of mountain ranges or rivers. Together with my photographs, these drawings constitute, to borrow O'Rourke's term, "hybrid mapping media,"—an aesthetic that combines GPS with sound sampling, photo, video imagery, or text. As I didn't always follow established routes while I walked (e.g., when I traversed an edge of an open coal mine or crossed a stream), the data I got from my GPS were often imprecise and came with frequent errors. My maps, therefore, serve less for planning future trips to the area and more as a reminder of the locations I visited, a memento of my connection with the place of my birth. Within the context of my work, they are a tool for evoking the experience of a walk for the viewer. Each line represents a separate walk. Their linear rather than circular shape points to the singularity of experience in a location subject to dramatic changes where a return to the same place was not always possible. Their juxtaposition with a nearly abstract image of land surface that connotates cartographic representation further points to the concept of mapping a location without visible signs of history or human existence. Additionally, through the process of hand-drawing on the book page, the routes that initially started as digital GPS data become ever so slightly altered—just like our memories change every time we evoke them, some events pale, others become more colorful and exciting.

[14] Karen O'Rourke, *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013).

Walking as a discipline of art is closely connected to the discipline of map-making. For example, the Walking Artist Richard Long starts all his expeditions with the purchase of a detailed topographical map of the area he wants to explore, then proceeds to chart his planned route. Long's site-specific land art and his indoor installations often include maps that communicate the spatial representation of the area he covered, the topographical make-up (through the use of the material of that particular landscape, such as rocks), and his impressions and emotions while he walked.[15] Long's approach to map-making is thus closely related to the discipline of deep mapping—"an emerging approach at the crossroads of cartography and the humanities that aims to study places through mapping from multiple sources including fiction, art, stories, and memories."[16]

Modern western map-making is closely connected to the emergence of sciences, technology, and nation-states in Europe. Therefore, maps frequently function as instruments of political power used to construct boundaries, national identities, or promote the status quo. Artists, on the other hand, frequently engage with maps to reveal their origin as social constructs and to point towards realities different from those mapped by normative cartographic institutions.[17] Canadian artist Shannon Bool, for instance, uses cartography to draw attention to the subordination of women and female bodies within modern architecture and urban design. In *Bombshells*, Bool features the urban design plans of the architect Le Corbusier whose ideas on modern architecture also influenced the building plans for the new town of Most where I was born. Bool juxtaposes Le Corbusier's plans made in French Algeria in the 1930s with postcard

[15] Richard Long, *Walking The Line* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002).
[16] Ribeiro, D. M and S. Caquard, "Cartography and Art," *The Geographic Information Science & Technology Body of Knowledge* (1st Quart (2019).
[17] Denis Wood, "Map Art," *Cartographic Perspectives. Journal of the North American Cartographic Information Society*, no. 53 (n.d.): 5–14.

representations of Oriental female nudes popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The resulting photocollages challenge the politics of appropriation and colonization of the architect and his contemporaries, as well as the role of architecture in controlling our behaviors.[18]

In *A House with No Walls*, I engage with cartography in several different ways. Although I am aware of the limitations of maps issued in communist Czechoslovakia in the second half of the twentieth century, I rely on them as a source of information for locating towns that were demolished. Second, the maps I use serve as sources of visual inspiration for constructing some of my photographs and as a source material that I imbed directly into my artwork. Through the process of printing historical maps on transparencies and juxtaposing them with the image of the location in its current state, I suggest both the impermanence of map making in Czechoslovakia and the removal of towns. Furthermore, by inverting historical maps in Photoshop, I refer to the transformation of North Bohemian towns from positive to negative space and eventually, with recultivation of former mines into recreational areas, into positive space again.

[18] Shannon Bool, *Bombshell* (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2019).

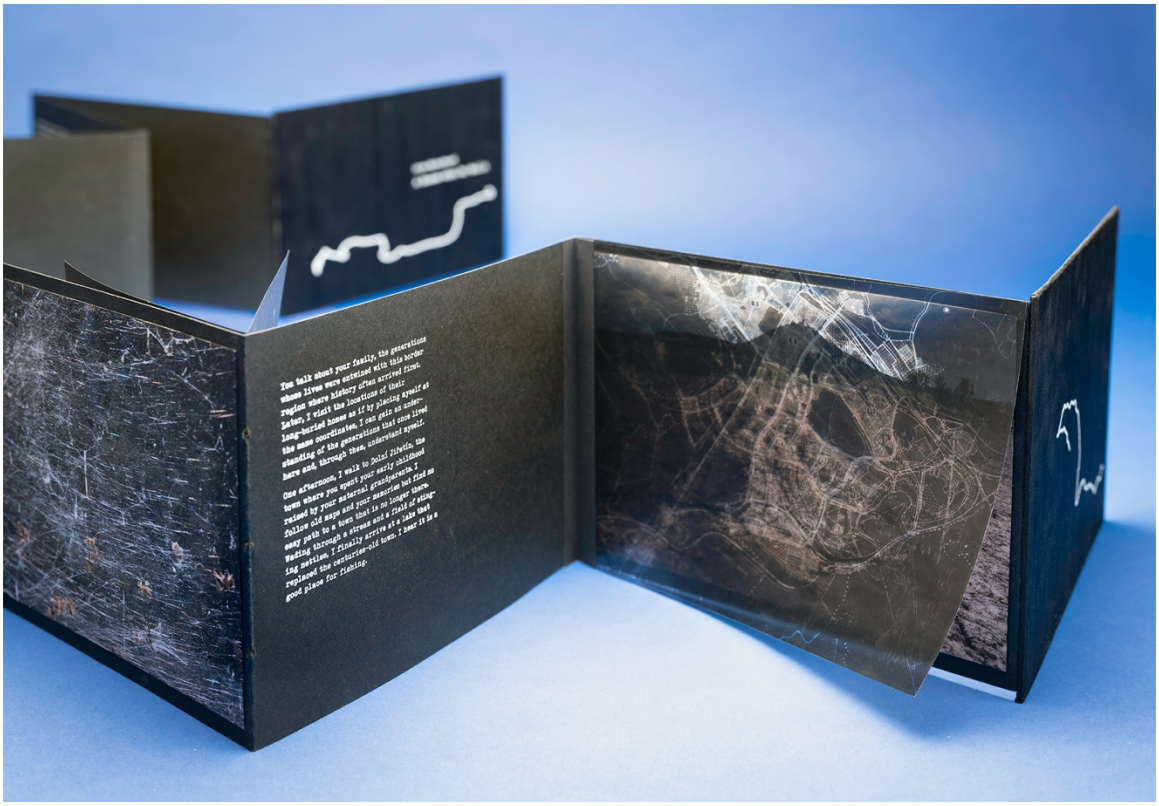
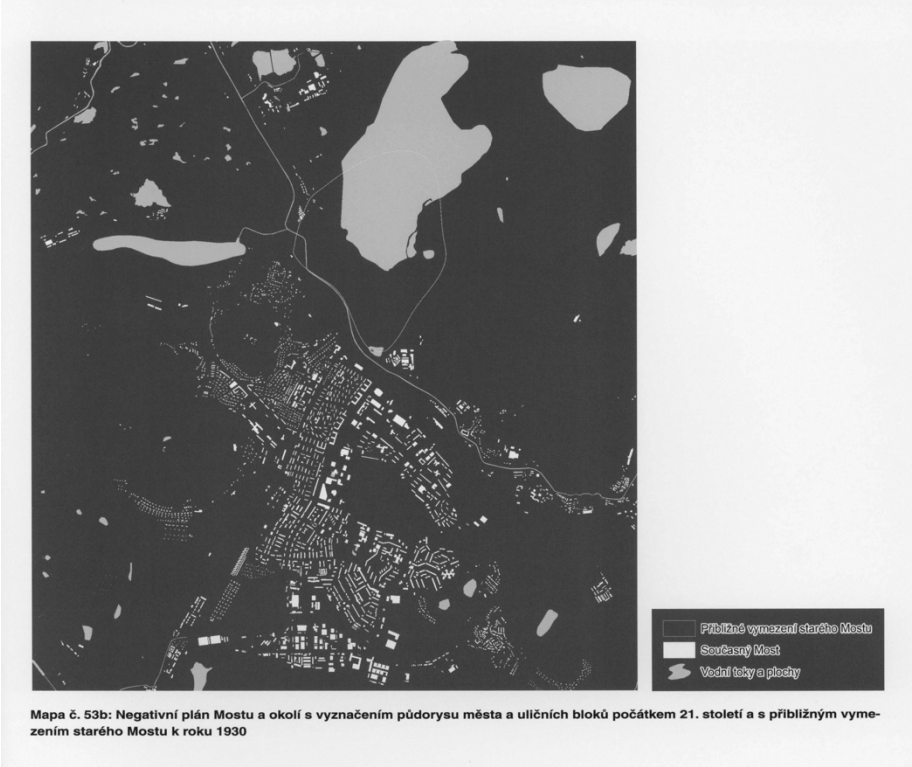


Fig. 7. Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, Handbound Artist book, 2021.



Mapa č. 53b: Negativní plán Mostu a okolí s vyznačením půdorysu města a uličních bloků počátkem 21. století a s přibližným vymezením starého Mostu k roku 1930

Fig. 8. *Negative plan of the town of Most and its Surrounding*, Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Science, 2014.

This “Negative Plan of the town of Most” which indicates an approximate location of the old town of Most in the 1930s, served as a direct inspiration for my process of inverting maps in Photoshop.

In his 1995 book *Landscape and Memory*, art historian Simon Schama examines how representations of landscapes in art and popular media reflect and reinforce cultural and political attitudes and contribute to forming our collective and personal identities.[19] Schama advocates for going to the field in addition to researching history in the archives—a pursuit he calls "the archive of the feet." He accentuates the landscapes' potential to reveal not only what we have lost but also what we have yet to find. He further believes there can be strength in the connection of culture and nature and that this strength is often "hidden beneath the layers of the commonplace."[20] Directly inspired by Schama's poetic text, I have approached the Bohemian landscape as a repository of memories and histories that might not be immediately visible but that still convey the passage of time and the movement of the people who passed through that landscape. For instance, as many of the former towns were eventually transformed from mines into lakes—some of them now the largest in the Czech Republic—I often photographed bodies of water. Furthermore, my representations of lakes serve as a nod to the origins of the town of Most which was established in the eleventh century over a network of swamps.[21] In that sense, my images point to the ironic life-cycle of a town whose downfall was standing over coal deposits too rich for those in power to resist.

I juxtaposed these images with representations of coal mines to further point at the personal and cultural destabilization resulting from coal extraction. This sequence highlights the contrast of the strange appeal of this landscape with its history of destruction and the interplay of presence and absence. Furthermore, I heeded the examples of photographers who examine events that concluded before their act of photographing, such as earlier mentioned Vitaljić, or writers

[19] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995).
[20] Ibid. 14.
[21] The literal translation of the Czech word *most* is bridge.

such as Lucy Lippard who suggests that when it comes to relating issues of land use, landscape photographs themselves cannot effectively communicate their context. In *A House with No Walls,* I also offer information through text to examine the complexities of the North Bohemian landscape and my relationship to the region of my birth.[22]

[22] Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014). 168.

Fig. 9 and Fig. 10. Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, 2020.

My father was born in Most, a borderland city that got its name after the Czech word for bridge. Like a medieval Babylon, the town drew strangers from foreign places, merchants from Prague on the way to Germany, Germans seeking riches in one of the region's mines, miners who stayed so long they forgot who else they could be.

I was born in Most, a modern, sprawled-out city built to replace the old one that still hovers nearby like a phantom older brother. Our cities share little except their names. His was made of round cobblestones polished by thousands of steps scurrying across the broad town squares into dark alleyways, perhaps to disappear inside one of the many pubs where a fight was always about to break loose. "Even I would avoid those," my father laughs. "What a terrible city," he shakes his head, but not without kindness.

My Most is wide open, full of sharp edges, rectilinear streets, and concrete apartment blocks built higher and higher every decade yet falling short of the greatness the city promised. Only the thick smog that silently creeps in every morning before daybreak offers a thin illusion of privacy. "What a terrible city," I think, but with a hint of amusement, the same kind we feel when we complain about our families and then defend them fiercely. And ultimately, that is what *A House with No Walls* is about: about the mixed emotions we harbor for our hometowns, for the trips back that even after decades away have the power to reveal something new, about the bridges that tie us to the place we once called home.

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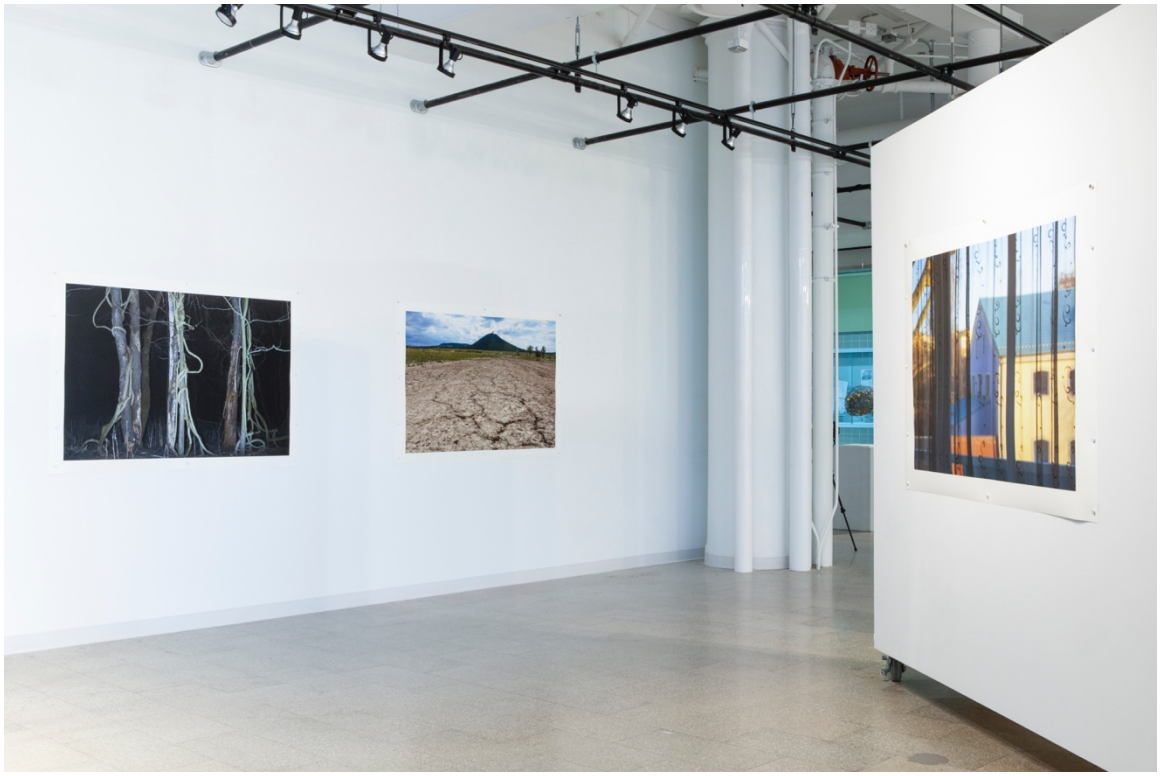
Additional Documentation:

A House with No Walls, Installation View, RIT City Art Space Gallery, April 2021



A House with No Walls, Installation View, RIT City Art Space Gallery, April 2021

A House with No Walls, Handmade Artist book, 2021.

Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, 2019.

Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, 2020.

Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, 2020.

Untitled, *A House with No Walls*, 2019.